community,[4] and even as a symbol capable of multiple reinterpretations, appropriations and uses,[5] Bromyard's anecdote returns us to the church, to the mass and to something incomparably more fundamental. The consecration of

concerned."[8] The practical challenge to this theological tenet was all too obvious. In the early 1320s, the English Franciscan William Ockham (in a thoroughly orthodox treatise) raised the problem this way, "[I]t is clear that the body of Christ is not seen in the sacrament of the altar, it is only understood, only the appearance of the bread is really seen." Ockham then adds for good measure, "no one would hold that the body of Christ really is contained under the appearance of the bread were it not for the authority of the Savior and of the Church."[9] Ockham's observation was neither original, nor controversial, but it is an important marker.

In the generations after Ockham, over the course of the fourteenth century, the perceptual challenges posed by the Eucharist would come to be framed in ever starker terms becoming a touchstone for debates about the natural order, the nature of truth, the truth of faith. These debates were always more than mere intellectual games because the Eucharistic event organized an entire religion, organized its beliefs and its practices. Indeed, it organized the very self-understanding of the Christian believer who gazed at it in the upraised hands of the priest, a believer whose connection to and experience of the world, of the divine and of himself, was entirely bound up with what he saw in those upraised hands. If Bromyard's unnamed holy man could look at the consecrated host and see and experience Christ as present, it could no longer be taken for granted that everyone shared that same vision, that same experience, that same faith and confidence. Bromyard himself was aware of this and it is this awareness, more likely than not, that explains why he chose to include his decidedly unspectacular tale in the *S a a a a*. After all, the story, as Bromyard tells it, has less to do with the miracle of the Eucharist than it does with this one man's belief in it, with the miracle of his belief in the forever unseen.

Sacred Mysteries, Curiosity, and the Eucharist

"There are many statements," writes John Wyclif, the Oxford trained theologian, in his *O E a* of 1379, "from both the saints and the church, that explain that these sensible sacraments are not the body and blood of Christ, but only their sign and yet in this matter, there are many Christians in

8. William of Auxerre, *S a a a*

he would deliver himself to us to honor in a veil." He concludes, "Every such deception is evil for man naturally seeks to know the truth" and since our senses "judge that the very substance of bread and wine remain after consecration, and not just their appearance, it does not seem fitting for the lord of truth to introduce such an illusion when graciously communicating so worthy a gift."[14] Such a miracle would undermine every system of knowledge, would render every certitude about the world worthless. Appearances would have no necessary connection to reality. Nothing could be inferred from the evidence of the senses.[15] We would find ourselves like the ancient sceptics, affirming that nothing can be known, asserting nothing but affirmations of our own ignorance. We would be unable to know the truth of our vows, of our faith, of our sanctity, of scripture itself.[16]

If God cannot deceive, then blame must rest squarely on the shoulders of the clergy. Throughout the lengthy nine chapters that make up *O E a -*, Wyclif includes only one Eucharistic miracle tale and, in Wyclif's hands, it is less a miracle tale than a story about the telling of such tales, about a priest who fuels his audience's devotion with a fraudulent wonder story. It seems that one day, according to Wyclif, a preacher told his congregation about a sick man who entered a church and, with great devotion and much show, made this public profession, "Oh God, reverently I consume you so that you will cure this illness that hinders me, not a spiritual illness, but a bodily one." Suddenly, a consecrated host descended from the altar and entered the man's heart through an opening in his chest (no doubt the source of his otherwise unexplained infirmity). The man was immediately and completely healed. So ends the unnamed priest's tale, but not Wyclif's. Later that day, Wyclif concludes, when a friend commended the priest on his fine performance, the priest confessed, "My mouth made up that pretty little lie."[17] Not all miracle stories are such blatant fabrications and Wyclif acknowledges that many highly esteemed and revered saints have reported experiencing such miracles. None of this does much to change Wyclif's opinion of things. "It

14. Wyclif, *D a a*, cap. III, p. 57 [ln. 7–25]: "Cum ergo Deus decrevit nobis dare donum tam magnum, videtur convenire sue veritati magnifice quod dedit nobis ipsum in velamento honorifico illusionem hominis excludente. Omnis enim talis decepcio est mala, cum homo naturaliter innititur cognoscere veritatem . . . Cum ergo sensus hominis tam exteriores quam interiores iudicant illud remanens esse panem et vinum rei-non-consecrate simillimum, videtur quod-non-convenit domino veritatis tantam illusionem inducere in graciose communicando donum tam dignum."
15. Wyclif, *D a a*, cap. III, p. 73 [ln. 7–14]: "Nec valet glosare dicta sancti quod intelligit sic esse nisi fiat miraculum, tum quia nullo existente miraculo-non-foret aliqua creatura, tum eciam quia nemo potest mereri vel beatificari sine miraculo, ymmo maneret ubique incertitudo, quando et ubi foret miraculum, et per consequens periret certitudo de quacunque materiali substancia et sic naturalis philosophia."
16. Wyclif, *D a a*, cap. III, pp. 78–9 [ln. 27–9]: "Sed contra istam perfidiam arguitur quod nedum tollit omnem naturalem scienciam sed eciam omnem fidem; nam sic devians nedum tenetur sentire cum antiquis errantibus quod nullam affirmacionem cognoscunt sed negaciones ut quod nichil sciunt et eis similia sed tenentur habere conscienciam de asserendo vel iurando aliquid contingens praxim hominum, et periret quelibet policia vel religio christiana; nam nemo debet mentiri pro toto mundo, sed generaliter pars securior est tenenda; cum ergo nulla noticia quam habemus de materiali substancia fundatur infallibiliter in principio infallibili congnoscendo, videtur quod irregulariter debemus nullam talem asserere."
17. Wyclif, *D a a*, cap. 1, pp. 19–20 [ln. 19–5].

would be exceedingly far-fetched," he notes, "to conclude from such stories that the body of Christ is really present in the host."[18]

Wyclif's is a demand that the miracle of the Eucharist conform to the demands of the senses and reason. If the consecrated host looks like bread, it really must be bread. A long tradition had worked in quite the opposite way, arguing that it was the very definition of a miracle that it exceed human reason. Writing in the 1270s, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas suggested that the term "miracle" derived from another word, "admiration," an experience "which arises when an effect is manifest, while its cause is hidden; as when a man sees an eclipse without knowing its cause." Admiration gives rise to wonder, but wonder is a relative experience. "A thing can be wonderful to one man," Thomas explains, "and not at all to others: as an eclipse is to a rustic, but not to an astronomer." Miracles, however, are not relative, but absolutely wondrous because their cause is "absolutely hidden from all: and this cause is God. And so, those things that God does outside the causes that we know, are called miracles."[19] Bonaventure, who was Thomas's contemporary at the University of Paris, suggests something similar when, in his *C a G , L* , he notes that a miracle arises "not from natural powers, but from supernatural powers." Inquiry into miracles, accordingly, requires a degree of humility. We ought to be like the childless Abraham, Bonaventure counsels, not like the childless Zechariah. When God told the aged Abraham that soon he would have a male heir and in time his descendants would be "as numberless as the stars," Abraham believed because "he considered the divine power." By contrast, when the angel Gabriel promised Zechariah that he and Elizabeth, old and barren though they seemed to be, would soon have a son, Zechariah "hesitated to believe, because he considered human impotence. From this contrast," Bonaventure concludes, "we are taught that miracles ought to be considered in terms of higher causes."[20]

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pastoralia are full of cautionary tales about friars and seculars, quite often scholars, who fail to consider the miracle of the Eucharist in terms of higher causes. The Franciscan author of the

late thirteenth-century

include both a spiritual remedy and "something of the nature of sensible signs, so that, as sensible objects had been the occasion of the soul's slide into sin, so too they would become the occasion of its ascent."[26] The epistemological deficit between what was seen in the consecrated host and what was asserted to be present was made good by recourse to what, in a manual written to train young Franciscan novices, Bonaventure, and any number of other theologians, would call our "mental eyes." The Eucharist needed to be seen and consumed spiritually, but these spiritual senses did not so much bypass the corporeal senses as work with them, complete them. Bonaventure advised fasting, regimes of penance and a continual reflection on, even identification with, Christ's humiliation, suffering and pain.[27] Preachers, Bromyard advised, must urge their congregations towards right belief, confession, penance and a vigilant custody of the house of conscience.[28] Worthy reception of the Eucharist depended upon this physical and spiritual preparation and the results of such preparation could be overwhelming, an almost palpable sense of spiritual consolation.[29]

Robert Holkot on Deceiving Gods and Invincible Ignorance

No good any of this for Wyclif, who again and again returns to the sheer immensity of the divine deception that seems implicit in the doctrine of the real bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. If the appearance of bread could regularly exist in the total absence of its proper substance, then why not every appearance? From our perspective, the world would become nothing but a "ball of accidents," all surface and no depth, forever misleading, deceiving, damning. In many respects, and despite the controversy that surrounded him, Wyclif's fears and arguments were neither original nor unique. Scholastic theologians in both England and France had already developed any number of scenarios involving (for lack of a better expression) a deceiving God. These scenarios or thought experiments were especially tied to debates about the nature of vision and cognition, to something known as intuitive cognition, the immediate intellectual or sensory grasp of an object's presence and existence. William Ockham, as is so often the case, is the most famous player in these debates. Imagine you are looking at a star. Now imagine that God, who can do anything, destroys the star while conserving your vision of it. What you

26. Bonaventure, *B*, in *O*, *a* V, P. VI, c. I, p. 265: "Ad hoc ergo, quod medicina correspondens esset omnibus supradictis, oportuit, quod-non-tantum esset spiritualis, verum etiam aliquid haberet de sensibilibus signis, ut, sicut haec sensibilia fuerunt animae occasio labendi, ita essent ei occasio resurgendi."

27. Bonaventure, *R*, in *O*, *a* VIII, c. iv, p. 317: "Quod si in die dominico propones communicare, studeas te ante per triduum as fervorem spiritus ordinare, ut sis in sexta feria praecedenti ab omni cogitatione immunda abstractus. Semper autem habeas mentales oculos ad Jesum crucifixum, spinis coronatum, aceto et felle potatum, sputis et contumelies saturatum, a peccatoribus blasphematum, acerbissima morte consumptum, lancea perforatum, a mortalibus jam sepultum."

28. Bromyard, *S*, "Eucharistia," cap. VI, pp. 246b–247a.

29. Bonaventure, *T*, in *O*, *a* VIII, cap. II:5. It is worth noting here that in this entire treatise, Bonaventure never once discusses looking at the Eucharist.

now see is a nonexistent star. There is no necessary connection between what you see and what exists.[30]

In the generation after Ockham, in the 1330s, another Englishman, the Dominican Robert Holkot would, for the first time so far as I can make out, almost entirely frame the analysis of the Eucharist within the problematic of divine deception. God can do more than the intellect can understand, Holkot asserts, and if he wished, he could hide the entire *a* *a* under the appearance of a mouse, the substance of an ass under the appearance of a man.[31] When all is said and done, Holkot accepts what would form the core of Wyclif's arguments against the bodily presence of Christ in the host. For Holkot, the possibility of this sort of divine deception reveals the limits of human knowledge, and he readily admits that there can be no absolute certitude when it comes to knowledge about singular things, about flies and stars and men.[32] For all that, when we see something, we do not normally feel compelled to doubt its existence. Holkot believes this response is reasonable. "I am sufficiently persuaded," he concludes, "that God would not work such transmutations because he has not revealed such things to anyone, nor does it appear that he would do such things unless great utility would result."[33] In other words, experience to teach us that God would only deceive people in this way if he had some very good reason.

Holkot's seemingly casual, even comfortable, acceptance of these consequences at this point in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *S* cannot fully conceal the hidden tensions and strains within the argument. In order to explain away any possible deception and falsity in the very sacrament of

30. William Ockham, *Q* *a* VI, q. 6, in eds. Gedeon Gál et al., *O* *a* *a*, vol. IX (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1980), 605. For brevity, I have greatly simplified Ockham's analysis. Philotheus Boehner, "The Notitia Intuitiva of Non-Existents According to William Ockham," in ed. Eligius Buytaert, *C* *A* *O* *a* (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1958), 274–87, offers the clearest account of how Ockham situates this scenario within his broader epistemological and cognitive theories. Compare with Katherine Tachau, *V* *a* *C* *A* *O* *a* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 115–

truth, earlier theologians had made recourse to the language of figures and mysteries, to the fittingness of what appears in relation to the sacrament's deeper and ultimate truth. In the early fourteenth-century preaching manual, the *Fa* , the anonymous author argues that the Eucharist's perceptual discrepancies, far from being mere deceptions or illusions, are actually paradoxes whose meaning, if properly understood, can deepen the believer's faith. The whiteness of the consecrated host, for example, indicates that we ought "to be pure and white in the chastity and purity of our life."[34] Holkot, by contrast, leaves the entire discussion at the level of sensory awareness. He never redefines the Eucharist's perceptual challenges as figurative paradoxes and this means that he never shifts the analysis from the level of empirical to spiritual experience. Rather, Holkot opts to define the believer's position with respect to the Eucharist entirely in terms of the fundamental breakdown that it reveals in the natural order. The Eucharist moves from being a unique (if uniquely repeatable) miraculous event, to being the very standard around which all sensory experience and natural knowledge is organized.

Holkot's steadfast refusal to leave the level of empirical analysis opens the door to what would, several decades later, become Wyclif's greatest fear. Holkot's emphasis on sensory discrepancy introduces the real and unacceptable possibility that God did, in fact, erect the very sacrament of truth on a scaffold of falsity, that God, in short, is a liar. Holkot was far from the only fourteenth-century theologian to confront this problem. It had become something of a hot topic and point of controversy for Holkot's own Dominican community in England.[35] The (somewhat) deeper roots for the specifically fourteenth-century shape of this discussion can be traced to debates about God's creative capacities and omnipotence. Could God have created another world, a better world than the one (that is, one) that he actually did create? To resolve questions like these, theologians tended to distinguish between God's absolute power (*a a a*), that is, his power considered in terms of anything he could possibly do, and his ordained power (*a a a*), that is, the way he freely chose to express his power in the particular creative act that is this world. Questions like these compelled many fourteenth-century theologians, beginning with John Duns Scotus and William Ockham, to recognize the utter contingency of creation. God was in no way bound to create this world, nor any other world for that matter. He could have created a different world with different sorts of laws.[36]

34. *Fa* , V.ii, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 409.

35. On these debates see Hester Goodenough Gelber, *I C Ha B O* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 191–222.

36. For an overview of these debates, see William Courtenay, "The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages," in *D O a O M a P* , ed. T. Rudavsky (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), 243–69; and *Ca a V : A H D A a O a P* (Bergamo: P. Lubrina, 1990). Also, Edward Grant, "The Condemnation of 1277, God's Power, and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages," *Va* 10 (1979): 211–44.

Reflections on God's omnipotence and the contingency of creation, not only forced medieval theologians to rethink the nature of nature and the status of natural laws, but also the nature of grace and the economy of salvation. For Holkot, as for any number of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, it gave rise to what became known as covenantal theology.[37] Just as the world is utterly contingent, so are the various roads to salvation, the sacraments. God could have chosen different sacraments, different rules for human accession to grace. There is nothing intrinsic to the sacraments that requires them to be efficacious. There is no human action whatsoever that, considered on its own, merits God's forgiveness or guarantees us our salvation. Rather, there exists something like a covenant, a pact, an agreement, between God and man. God has freely established an order and road to salvation. If human beings do their best to follow that road, to participate in those sacraments, then God will freely (and not out of any compulsion) recognize those efforts as worthy.[38] None of this, however, was without its complications and problems. Covenantal theologies sought to maximize God's freedom while simultaneously seeking to find some source of order and regularity in the world. But it was a solution that was itself prone to the very sorts of problems it sought to resolve. After all, if God truly is free, couldn't he revoke or alter his covenant with men? Couldn't he promise things and then fail to keep his promise?[39]

For Holkot, questions about the truth of the Eucharistic event are fundamentally connected to debates about the trustworthiness of both the natural

intention of deceiving a creature." And so it is, Holkot explains, that God rightfully deceived the Egyptians, and continues to deceive demons, not to mention various and sundry sinners.[40] As Holkot understands both scripture, as well as God's freewill and omnipotence, divine deception is not merely an ever-present possibility, it is part and parcel of God's continuing involvement in the world. In such a world, against such deceptions, our ignorance is complete. For Holkot, the possibility of such invincible ignorance shifts the emphasis from the truth or falsity of our beliefs, to the quality with which we believe, to the sheer act of believing in and doing what God commands. God can deceive us. God could order us to worship a creature as God, to believe something false. God may well be inscrutable, but we must have faith that he is not malicious and that he will keep his promises. So long as we do what he says, believe in good faith, our faith, however, false, will still have merit.[41]

Theologians, however, were far from the only medieval Europeans concerned about God's trustworthiness and the truth of their beliefs. And here we can move from the seemingly abstract debates of the schoolmen, from Holkot's easy willingness to accept the epistemological perils implicit in covenantal theology, to the broader world of popular religious practice and belief. The practice of personal confession, which the church had instituted as an

these same sorts of dilemmas, between the ideal of a complete and accurate examination of conscience and a recognition of the uncertainties that plagued all such investigation. Even the earliest manuals of personal confession from the late eleventh century recognize the importance of the penitent's intentions and beliefs. Beginning in the thirteenth century, however, confessional treatises place an ever greater emphasis on the role and complexity of intention. In his *L Ha C*, the fourteenth-century Spanish curate Guido of Monte Rocherii noted that "human intentions are nearly infinite."[42] As a result, the sinner can rarely be sure that when she examines her conscience she sees everything or that she sees things correctly. Every appearance of sanctity or sin, every intention, holds out the potential for deception, like so many veils, so many false appearances. Holkot, when faced with similar conundrums of invincible ignorance, invoked the idea of our faith in God's goodness and God's reliability. Confessors did something similar. They urged penitents to trust God's mercy, to have faith in the practice of confession

through itself and not inhere in a substance."[45] Wyclif's horror at this moment certainly has something to do with the nightmare of a world made unknowable, but its emotional register derives from the related and much more ominous possibility that we could become unknowable to ourselves. If self-subsistent

conceived, this change does nothing to transform the very being of the bread, does nothing to transform the natural order.

operate more or less successfully, then there is all the more reason to worry when we move to those areas where reason is more prone to failure, when we consider the quality and truth of our faith, when we look within the inscrutable and potentially infinite and self-deceptive depths of conscience. Wyclif's concerns have little to do with certainty. They have everything to do with security.

The radical separation of the spiritual from the natural, however, comes at the price of placing an even greater emphasis upon the believer's conscience, on the quality and the truth of his intentions. If the sacrament is truly a sign, then how well it functions depends entirely upon the one who reads, interprets, and follows it. When Wyclif writes "the truth itself hates the duplicity of falsity," the falsity he has in mind is the falsity of belief, those corruptions